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A BOTANICAL DISASTER

ERWIN F. LANGE

A chance meeting of two botanical explorers along the shores of the Columbia near The Dalles, Oregon, on November 13, 1843, left a story of disaster which completely altered the life of a German botanist, Frederick George Jacob Lueders. For on that day Lueders stood by helplessly as he watched the turbulent Columbia swallow up his entire botanical collection and collecting equipment. In a matter of seconds the results of three years' labor in the wild and mountainous parts of the United States were washed away. All that Lueders was able to rescue from the water was a treasured copy of his Torrey and Gray Flora.¹ This event would probably have gone unrecorded in the pages of Northwest science history had it not been for the famed United States explorer, Captain John C. Fremont, who witnessed the event and noted it in his journal. Concerning the calamity he wrote:

A gentleman named Lueders, a botanist from the city of Hamburg, arrived at the bay I have called by his name, while we were bringing up the boats. I was delighted to meet at such a place a man of kindred pursuits; but we had only the pleasure of a brief conversation, as his canoe, under the guidance of two Indians, was about to run the rapids; and I could not enjoy the satisfaction of regaling him with breakfast, which after his recent journey, would have been an extraordinary luxury.

All his few instruments and baggage were in the canoe, and he hurried around to meet it at Grave Yard Bay; but he was scarcely out of sight when, by the carelessness of the Indians, the boat was drawn into the midst of the rapids, and glanced down the river, bottom up, with a loss of everything it contained. In the natural concern I felt for his misfortune, I gave to the little cove the name of Lueders' Bay.

Fremont's note aroused but little interest until Leslie L. Haskins came to Brownsville, Oregon, as a photographer and botanist. As a small boy in

¹ This book is today a part of the library collection of the Oregon Historical Society. Augusta Lueders, a daughter of the German botanist, sent it to Leslie L. Haskins, author of "Wild Flowers of the Pacific Coast," who presented it to the Historical Society library.

Sauk City, Wisconsin, around 1890 he had often seen and heard of an old German gardener and botanist, Frederick G. J. Lueders, a resident of that community. On coming to Oregon, Haskins was surprised to find that no one could give him information regarding the life and activities of the German botanical explorer. Only as the result of an intensive correspondence was Haskins able to uncover the story of Lueders' life. The material was supplied by Miss Augusta Lueders, daughter of the botanist.

Frederick Lueders was born in Hamburg, Germany, on October 3, 1813, the son of a gardener. In Hamburg he attended a private school and later studied botany at the Hamburg Botanical Gardens. Then he entered the large seed house of Haage in Erfurth, Saxony. On returning to Hamburg, the Society for Natural Science offered Lueders the opportunity for scientific exploration in the United States. To qualify for the opportunity, Lueders again attended school to learn navigation, and at graduation he qualified for first mate.

Concerning the coming years of his life, Lueders wrote² a friend in 1861:

I arrived in Sauk Prairie in July, 1841, in company with my friend . . . We reached Green Bay by way of the lakes, and passed through the richly wooded country, which borders upon the Fox River and Lake Winnebago. Leaving the forest and entering the open country, we were much surprised at the beauty of the natural park. At that early time a few farms only guided the stage road. In almost every house where we stopped, the hospitable people invited us to spend a few days at their new home, and share what their humble plantation could afford, of course without pay. Arrived at Fort Winnebago, the terminous of the stage. The fortification was still garrisoned; there was besides a store, tavern and blacksmith's shop near the fortress. From there we went down the Wisconsin River by a boat of the French fur trader.

I spent the rest of the season about Sauk prairie in collecting several hundred species, in part, very interesting plants.

Although I did not intend to spend the winter there, I was surprised by it before I could find conveyance to the Mississippi.

In March, 1842, I went to Galena, And from there to St. Louis. There I found an easy introduction in my pursuit, as a Dr. Asa Gray, of New York, had kindly furnished me with a letter to Dr. Engelmann, whose services for the development of Western horticulture are amply known.

After a short stay in the city I proceeded to search the western part of Missouri, collecting plants and curiosities. On my excursion to that part of Missouri, I found opportunity to gather information about the Western country, and resolved to pursue the next spring a westerly course as far as terra firma would permit me to study and collect the flora of the mountainous country. In the meantime there had awakened a spirit of emigration to Oregon, and large bodies of emigrants were along the frontier of Missouri forming several companies. One of these I joined leaving the civilized world in May, 1843.

In the course of the journey, I collected plants and noted down peculiarities as circumstances would permit.

The loss of my baggage in the rapids below the Grand Cascades of the Columbia River, rests not only severe with the collection of plants, but perhaps more so with a good many valuable instruments and other collecting material, as I had fitted myself out to spend several years in that part of the country.

² Letter in herbarium, University of Oregon, Eugene.

The kindest assistance was offered me by the gentlemanly officers of Fort Vancouver, but could not lead me into the course which my enthusiastic mind had marked out, and from there all communication by letter was tedious and uncertain. I concluded to return to Europe and engage anew, after having gained some useful experience.

In February, 1844, I left the mouth of the Columbia River for the Sandwich Islands, and proceeded from there to Chile, touching the Paradise of the Pacific (Otaheite), then in a state of siege. I arrived in Hamburg in November of the same year.

In the short space of my absence, family circumstances had taken a change, that made my presence there, at least for several years, necessary. So the course nearest my heart, for future life, was beyond my individual control.

At Christmas, 1844, I again hailed the Mississippi. I lived at St. Louis until 1851, and after that time in Sauk County (Wisconsin) tilling the soil and my mind.

— F. G. J. Lueders

He spent the rest of his life in Sauk City, Wisconsin, and engaged in many astronomical studies. In 1869 he had published in Hamburg "The Aurora Borealis and Law of Reciprocal Action in the Universe" and in 1884 the University of Wisconsin published his observations on a number of Auroras which he had studied. Privately, Lueders also published a pamphlet "Memoirs on Physical Astronomy." For many years he was city treasurer of Sauk City. He died December 21, 1904.

Thus a botanical disaster prevented Lueders' name from being associated with Northwest botany. Had his specimens been properly reported, there is no doubt that his name would have been linked with species of western plants. Lueders' Bay, named by Fremont, is also a lost geographical name. One can only speculate on its location, and as the large dams on the Columbia are changing the topography along the river, Lueders' Bay itself may no longer be in existence.

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The death, last March, of Robert Hibbs Peebles, one of the world's leading cotton breeders and an outstanding student of cotton genetics, was a great loss to southwestern agriculture. He was the originator of what had become, in recent years, the preferred variety of Pima (American-Egyptian) long-staple cotton, and carried on investigations of the inheritance of various characters of this very important crop-plant. Toward the end of his career he was working on the problem of how to insure the greatest possible degree of natural cross-pollination, in view of the fact that artificial cross-pollination of cotton varieties usually increases the yield, as compared with that of either parent. The endeavor was to do, with cotton, what has been done so successfully with hybrid corn.

¹ This paper was in press at the time of Dr. Kearney's death on October 19, 1956.
—Ed.